THE PARABLE OF THE FIG-TREE,

EXPLAINED AND APPLIED:

A

SERMON,

PREACHED IN

St. Andrew's Church,

HALIFAX,

ON

WEDNESDAY, 1*st* JANUARY, 1823.

BY THE

REV. JOHN MARTIN.

"*Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?*"

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Rev Mr Burton

TO THE

MEMBERS OF SESSION,

THE COMMITTEE OF MANAGERS,

AND

THE CONGREGATION

OF

ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, HALIFAX,

THE FOLLOWING SERMON,

DELIVERED IN THEIR HEARING,

AND PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,

IS, WITH FERVENT PRAYERS

FOR THEIR TRUE HAPPINESS, INSCRIBED,

BY THEIR DEVOTED AND AFFECTIONATE PASTOR,

THE AUTHOR.

Sermon.

LUKE xiii. 7.

BEHOLD, THESE THREE YEARS I COME SEEKING FRUIT ON THIS FIG-TREE, AND FIND NONE: CUT IT DOWN; WHY CUMBERETH IT THE GROUND?

THE Immortal nature and final destiny of man carry our views and prospects far beyond this transitory and perishing scene of existence, to a state of never ending duration; to objects of the utmost interest and magnitude, to the mansions of joyous felicity, and the abodes of unutterable misery and wo. Were the present fleeting life the measure of our existence, were the soul to sink into annihilation at the death of the body, were there no hereafter to provide for; then we might safely pursue that path, which appetite points out and inclination recommends, without any dread of a future reckoning to arrest our progress, or to damp our enjoyments: we might eat and drink, because to-morrow we shall die. But when we look forward, when we extend our views beyond the present narrow span of duration, *eternity* bursts in upon our minds in all its reality and in all its importance, claims us as the subjects of its endless reign, and holds out *every* thing to influence, if any thing can possibly influence, the hopes and fears, the desires and expectations of such blind and depraved mortals as ourselves. We behold a life of holiness and piety ter-

minating in joy unspeakable and full of glory, and a life of vice and immorality ending in weeping and wailing, and gnashing of teeth. For the connection between our *conduct* in time, and our *condition* in eternity, is very close and intimate, and ought to be constantly and habitually present to our minds: as we now sow we shall hereafter reap; "He that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting."* By our thoughts, by our words, and by our actions in the present life, we shall be justified or condemned at last. Time is the stream in which we are all hastening downwards into the ocean of eternity, and the manner in which we mark and improve its rapid movements, redeem what is past and spend what is present, will determine the nature of our future and everlasting condition. Day and night, and the regular revolution of the seasons, divide it into separate portions; each of which is well fitted to teach us some salutary lesson. Every morning that dawns, and every evening that darkens around us, ought to awaken the most solemn and devout meditations in our souls. The beauties of the opening spring, the luxuriance of summer, the richness and abundance of autumn, and even the tremendous blasts of winter, communicate the most pleasing and profitable instruction to an intelligent and pious mind: and the commencement of every new year especially summons us to serious reflection, by reminding us that another stage of our earthly career is finished, that the period of repentance and of hope is drawing nearer and nearer to a close, that the day and the hour is not far distant, when we, like our fathers, shall go the way whence we shall not return.

Such, my Brethren, are the feelings, and such are the reflections, with which we should witness the termination of one year, and the commencement of ano-

* Gal. vi. 7, 8.

ther. The year which has now closed, is gone for ever, and carried with it some of our nearest and dearest friends to the house appointed for all living; and the year which has just commenced, calls upon each of us to number our days, to attend to the warning which the silent but rapid movement of time suggests, and prepare to meet our God. Who can foresee all the changes that may happen even during that short period? May we not expect that it will carry *some*, perhaps *many* now present, into an eternal state? And as we are uncertain who are the destined subjects of the king of terrors, is it not necessary, is it not prudent, that each one should make the application to himself? For what the Saviour says unto one he says unto all:—"WATCH."*

To assist our meditations, and to impress our hearts on this important occasion, when we are called in a very solemn manner to consider our duty as dying and accountable creatures, the parable of the fig-tree, addressed by our blessed Lord and Saviour to his disciples and followers, seems peculiarly adapted. Like all his other parables, it conveys the most necessary and important instruction to our minds, and convinces us, although we have not enjoyed the advantage of his personal ministry, that "never man spake like this man." In explaining this parable, we conceive that it has a primary and immediate reference to the Jews, the ancient people of God, then living in the land of promise, to their circumstances, and character, and prospects as a church and as a nation. The history of this peculiar people is truly singular and interesting, and it has been recorded by the pen of inspiration for the instruction of the church till the end of time. The events of their history, the things which happened unto them in Egypt, in the wilderness, in the land of Canaan, and during their captivity in Babylon, were designed not only for their own

* Mark xiii. 37.

reformation and improvement, but also as ensamples to us; and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. By the distinguishing and unmerited goodness of heaven this people were separated from the surrounding Heathens, were brought into a covenant relation with God, and honoured with the high designation of his chosen, his peculiar people. They enjoyed many advantages in this state of friendship and favour with God. "To them pertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; theirs were the Fathers, and of them, as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever."* They had Prophets, and Priests, and altars, and sacrifices. To them were committed the sacred oracles, for their instruction and guidance. They had precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little and there a little. They had access to every institution, and enjoyed every blessing which could arouse their attention, excite their gratitude, and animate their obedience. "He showeth his word unto Jacob," saith the Psalmist, "his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them."† Might we not have expected, that this people would have rendered according to the benefit done unto them? Were not such distinguished advantages eminently calculated to promote their spiritual interests? But O, how great, how extensive, how inveterate the depravity of the human heart! What act of iniquity will a sinner, when left to the direction of his own appetites and passions, not commit? Amidst the greatest external privileges the Jews were unthankful, and disobedient, and rebellious: "they tempted and provoked the most High God, and kept not his testimonies; but turned back and dealt unfaithfully like their fathers. They were turned aside like a deceitful bow: for they pro-

* Rom. ix. 4, 5. † Psalm cxlvii. 19. 20.

voked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images."* "Hear, O heavens;" saith the Prophet Isaiah, "and give ear, O earth; for the Lord hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me: The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil-doers, children that are corrupters! they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward."† They were therefore justly compared by our blessed Saviour, in the words of our text, to an unfruitful fig-tree. They were always covered with abundance of leaves, and put forth the blossoms of a fair and regular external profession. For you will observe, my brethren, (and I would in an especial manner entreat those who endeavour to unite the pleasures of sin with the profession of religion to attend to this observation) that amidst all their provocations and all their transgressions, they never laid aside entirely the forms and ceremonies of their religious worship. Even in the midst of the grossest idolatry, they in general professed an external respect to the service of the God of Israel. "They feared the Lord," says the Sacred Historian, "and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence."‡ But their acts of devotion, although regular and frequent, were entirely formal and hypocritical. They exhibited as a nation, no fruits of righteousness, no inward or practical religion, no true love to God, no genuine humility, no fervent gratitude, and no abiding confidence and dependence upon their gracious Preserver and Sovereign. Their motives were impure, their principles were corrupt, their hearts were unhallowed, and their practice inconsistent both with the spirit and the letter of the Divine Law. It was

* Ps. lxxviii.56,57,58. † Isa. i. 2, 3, 4. ‡ 2 Kings xvii.33.

impossible that their hypocrisy and insincerity could escape the observation of the Omniscient Jehovah, the owner of the vineyard in which the Jews were planted. They could easily deceive their fellow-men, who were blind and depraved, and willing to be deceived; and they were, alas! but too successful in deceiving themselves. But God cannot be deceived, for all things whether present, or past, or future, are constantly exposed to his immediate observation. When therefore he, as their Sovereign Lord and proprietor, came, seeking fruit upon the fig-tree, he found none. The most reasonable expectations were completely disappointed; he did not find fruit in any degree adequate to the attention and culture which had been bestowed upon it, or the fair appearances which it had displayed. For although the language here employed is general, and appears to include the whole nation, it is necessary to understand it in a qualified and restricted signification. It would be rash and uncharitable for us to suppose, that even during the time of their greatest apostacy and rebellion, all had departed from God and gone over to idolatry. When the Prophet Elijah, during a season of general and aggravated iniquity, conceived that he alone remained in Israel of the servants of the true God: the Lord, who knoweth them that are his, condescended to inform him that "he had still left seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which had not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which had not kissed him."* The patience and forbearance of God were long exercised, towards his professing and chosen people; for the Lord is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. During a long series of changes and events he endured their provocations. "Behold," says our Lord, "these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none." By the period of three years, here mentioned, some commentators would understand the time of our Saviour's public ministry among the Jews,

* 1 Kings xix. 18.

which they conceive had now lasted for that space of time. But as the Divine patience and long suffering were manifested towards this people for a much longer season, it is highly probable that this period of three years may denote, the three different kinds of administration, under which this people were successively placed. Their subjection to the immediate government of Jehovah, commonly termed their Theocracy, was the first of these years, extending from their deliverance out of Egypt to the commencement of the reign of Saul. Their monarchy may be considered as the second year, beginning with the reign of Saul, and extending to the departure of the sceptre from Judah at the birth of Christ; and their submission to the galling yoke of the Romans may be viewed as the third year, stretching from the departure of the sceptre from Judah to the destruction of the city and temple of Jerusalem. During all these different periods, the Lord was gracious and merciful to the Jews. He preserved them in a national state, and supplied them with those ordinances of religion which had a tendency to promote their spiritual instruction and edification. He gave unto them space to repent of their sins, but they repented not. "Behold," says he, "I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes; and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar."*

In the course of the last period, when the Messiah himself was the dresser of the vineyard, the Jews were still like a barren fig-tree, professing a strict adherence to the precepts of the Mosaic law, and attending regularly upon the external ordinances of the

* Matt. xxiii. 34, 35.

sanctuary; but making no improvement in their dispositions and views and conduct, bringing forth none of the peaceable fruits of righteousness to the praise and glory of God. Therefore the Lord, the proprietor of the vineyard, provoked with their obstinacy and impenitence, and grieved by their repeated and aggravated apostacies, announced his intention to cut them down as cumberers of the ground. This intention would have been instantly carried into execution, but for the intercession of Jesus, the dresser of the vineyard, who, moved with compassion at their unhappy condition, and desirous to make a farther trial of this highly favoured, but ungrateful and disobedient people, entreated that they might be allowed to continue in the enjoyment of their religious privileges for the current period, under the care and management of himself and his apostles; and if they did not, under these superior and distinguished advantages, return unto God, and bring forth works meet for repentance, then the threatening might be immediately carried into full effect. His request was granted, and the time of mercy and forgiveness prolonged. But when that period at length expired, this people were still living in sin, having despised the free and generous offers of the Gospel, having crucified the Lord of glory, and given themselves over to abandoned wickedness. Having filled up the measure of their transgressions, having despised the threatenings of the law, and rejected the offers of the gospel, the justice of heaven, which could no longer be restrained, fell with tremendous vengeance upon their guilty heads, sweeping away the greater part of them from the face of the earth, dispersing those that survived the dreadful catastrophe among the nations which they hated, consigning them to infamy and reproach in every land, making them, according to the threatening of the Lord by Moses, "an astonishment, a proverb, and a by-word, among all nations whither the Lord led them."*

* Deut. xxviii. 37.

This appears to be the original and immediate import of this instructive parable. We have seen how exactly its declarations and threatenings, have been verified in the history of the Jews. When we read the history of this stiff-necked and rebellious race, as it is recorded in the Old Testament, we are filled with mingled feelings of astonishment and indignation; astonishment at the goodness and forbearance of God, and indignation at their numerous, repeated, and aggravated provocations. We are perhaps inclined to think within ourselves, that if we had enjoyed their advantages, we would have acted in a very different way; we would not have rendered evil for good, and hatred for love; we would not have provoked God in such a wanton and impious manner. "But let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." The Apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthians to avoid the very same sins, which the Jews committed: an exhortation which was entirely unnecessary if they had not possessed the same evil hearts of unbelief, and been exposed to similar snares and temptations. "Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day, three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer."* Let us bring home this parable to ourselves, let us apply it to our own state, and character, and conduct, and see whether there are not with us, even with us, sins against the Lord our God; such sins as might justly provoke him to cut us down as cumberers of the ground.

In applying this parable to ourselves, we shall consider in the first place, every professing christian as a

* 1 Corinthians x. 7—10.

tree planted, for a certain period of time, in God's Spiritual vineyard; we shall show in the second place, that during this period he is furnished with every advantage for the cultivation of his moral and religious principles: we shall endeavour to evince, in the third place, that if the professing christian neglect to improve these advantages, he acts in a very foolish and injurious manner both to himself and others; he is a cumberer of the ground: and we shall attend, in the fourth and last place, to the awful sentence here denounced against the unfruitful professor: "Cut it down," saith our Lord, "why cumbereth it the ground." And may God give each one of us wisdom to understand, and humility to apply this solemn and interesting subject for our own Spiritual instruction and edification.

1. This parable intimates to us in the first place, that every professing christian is like a tree, planted for a certain period of time in God's Spiritual vineyard. When we assume the profession of religion, when we are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, when we associate with the people of God in the public services of the Sanctuary, we separate ourselves from those who sit in darkness and in the valley of the shadow of death, we withdraw, at least in profession, from open and avowed infidels, and from the world which lieth in wickedness. If we understand the nature of our religious profession, we certainly intimate our belief in the doctrines, and our approbation of the precepts and institutions of Christianity. Every person must be convinced, that there is a wide difference between a professing Christian and an open infidel, that the one is expected to think and act in a very different manner from the other. If there were no advantages to be derived from the Christian Religion, if it did not enlighten the mind and renovate the heart, if it did not elevate our views and reform our conduct, there would be no wisdom and propriety, in submitting to

its restraints and bearing its reproach, in forsaking all our earthly pleasures, and taking up our cross that we might follow the Redeemer. The Lord is pleased to afford us time to work out our salvation, to discover whether we are true christians or artful and designing hypocrites, whether we have made a profession of religion from a sincere belief of the truth, or from an indolent compliance with the customs and fashion of the age and place in which we live. That Almighty Being who brought us into the world, and placed us within the sacred enclosure of his church, has determined the bounds of our habitation, has confined the duration of our present existence within limits which we cannot pass. But whilst the number of our days is with him, whilst our mortal career is restricted to his appointment, he has wisely concealed under an impenetrable veil, the dread hour when we shall drop our connection with this transitory state, and enter into the world of Spirits. The reason of this concealment is obvious, and the appointment of heaven wise and gracious. If we knew the precise measure of our years upon earth, and could foresee the time and the manner of our departure from the world; such knowledge, instead of aiding, might retard our progress in the christian course, by leading to procrastination, and confirmed habits of immorality. Calculating upon that portion of life which is yet before us, we would be apt to give full indulgence to all our appetites and passions, to pursue with increased ardour our criminal course; from a conviction that there was still sufficient time remaining to repent of our sins, and return to God before our death. The very uncertainty, therefore, which attends our existence in this world, operates as a powerful inducement to watch and be sober, to keep the end of our journey as steadily and constantly in view as if it had already arrived, to employ every instant of our time, and avail ourselves of every advantage in preparing for that eternity, into which we may soon be introduced. For if the present moment only be

ours, if the next may seal our condition for ever, what man that regards his immortal interests, what man that thinks of the gain or loss to be sustained at death, what man that is not altogether sunk in the love of sensuality and crime, and degraded even below the rank of a rational being, would forget entirely his future responsibility, and rush in a daring, heedless and presumptuous manner, into the presence of his Omniscient and righteous Judge? Blind must be that understanding, and hard must be that heart, which is not affected at the prospect of dissolution. That man is sunk in an awful and deplorable state indeed, who can regard the Divine favour and displeasure with equal indifference; who is neither charmed with the joys of heaven, nor overawed by the terrors of hell: for we must either deny the truth of Divine Revelation, altogether, or believe in a state of future rewards and punishments, and be convinced that each of us must soon enter into that unseen and endless state.

Now have you, my brethren, considered the end for which you were called into existence, and brought within the reach of religious instruction and improvement? Has the Lord no right to expect a suitable return, for his kindness and mercy to you? Surely you have not been created and preserved in existence to dishonour God, and ruin your own souls. The object for which you have been introduced into life, and planted within the sacred enclosure of God's vineyard is, that you may yield the fruits of holiness in your lives and conversations, to the praise and glory of his holy name. Now, have you answered this purpose? Have you justified the expectations of your sovereign proprietor? or have you merely put forth the leaves of an empty profession, and existed hitherto as cumberers of the ground? These are questions of the utmost importance; and this is the season for applying them to your conscience, for reviewing the past, and forming resolutions for the future: a season which marks another stage in your

progress towards the land of Spirits. If you are conscious that you have neglected your duty and abused your mercies in the days that are past, have you not a louder call to repentance and obedience in the time to come? Ought you not to rejoice, and bless God that it is not too late for you; it is not too late for the chief of sinners to repent and believe the Gospel: "Behold, now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation."* "To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness."†

2. We observe in the second place, that during the time the professing christian is planted within the spiritual vineyard, he is favoured with every advantage for the cultivation of his moral and religious principles. He is not placed in this situation to be neglected and forgotten, to struggle with difficulties without assistance or support, to strike his roots in a stubborn and uncultivated soil, and spread his branches in a severe and inclement atmosphere. He is planted in a vineyard, he is nourished and cherished by the influences of the Spirit, and defended from the rigorous blasts of temptation and the storms of adversity, by the tender care of the Husbandman. So that in the end, if we should prove unfruitful, the evil must be traced, not to the deficiency of culture and attention, but to our innate and incurable obstinacy and depravity.

The owner of the vineyard hath adopted a beautiful and an efficient plan for training up the trees of righteousness for glory and honour and immortality. Motives and arguments are addressed to every power and faculty of the soul, and every feeling and affection of the heart, and enforced by every consideration, whether of interest or duty, of honour or of gratitude. The mercies of God are sent to allure us to

* 2 Cor. vi. 2. † Psalm xcv. 7, 8.

obedience, and his threatenings to deter us from the commission of sin. Our duty is pointed out, both by precept and example, with a clearness and a precision which exclude all controversy; and our danger, if we continue in sin, is held forth in such strong and forcible terms, that those who affect to disregard it, must be altogether inexcusable. The word of truth, which is able to make us wise unto salvation, is translated into almost every language spoken by man, and brought within the reach of those who feel inclined to perase it; and lest we should forget its instructions and despise its reproofs, the ministers of religion, God's spiritual husbandmen, are sent forth to preach the gospel to every creature, and as ambassadors for Christ to beseech sinners in his stead to be reconciled unto God. The language of Divine Providence is also very loud and instructive, and arouses many who neglect and despise other appointed means of salvation. Is it possible then, that persons with so many unspeakable advantages, should fail to profit by them? Is it possible that the condescensions and endearments of heaven, manifested in such an abundance and variety of ordinances and institutions, should make no salutary impression upon our minds? Is it possible for any person to forget, amidst repeated admonitions, that to whom much is given, of them much will be required? "What could have been done," saith the prophet, "more to my vineyard that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?"* Surely, there cannot be any necessity for more powerful and persuasive motives to duty; for those who improve the means already bestowed, find that they are sufficient to accomplish the end for which they were intended; they find, that, "all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works."†

* Isaiah v. 4. † 2 Tim. iii. 16, 17.

They find, that the doctrine of Christ crucified, is the wisdom and the power of God unto salvation, to every one that believeth. Embracing these truths, and trusting in this Almighty Saviour, innumerable multitudes have continued faithful unto the death, and are now rejoicing before the throne of God and of the Lamb. And surely, those who neglect and despise the means of grace, have no right to complain of their inefficacy. They were never intended to force our assent, but to incline and persuade us to obedience. And their influence can only be felt by those who improve them in humility and sincerity. It would be just as rational and consistent for us to expect, that the body would be supported by the sight or the smell of food, as to expect an inward and spiritual change, from an empty and formal profession of religion, without the exercise and application of the whole soul. The word of God must be received with meekness, it must be carefully studied, and faithfully applied; we must feel that it is "quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."* If the word of God has not such a powerful influence upon our minds, if the present means of grace are entirely ineffectual, our condition is hopeless indeed. If the blood of Christ cannot wash out the stains of our guilt and pollution, how can we expect to be purified from our defilement. There is no sacrifice for sin, but that which was once offered up upon the cross. There is no guide to heaven, but that gospel which is now preached unto us. And there is no way, by which we can escape from future misery, if we continue to despise and reject it. "For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation;

* Heb. iv. 12.

which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him."* "If we hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will we be persuaded though one rose from the dead."† With what care and attention then, ought we to search the scriptures, and receive the testimony which God hath given concerning his Son? Our eternal interests are at stake, and our improvement or abuse of our present advantages, will determine the nature of our future state.

3. We observe in the third place, that those who neglect to improve the advantages which we at present possess, are considered as cumberers of the ground, useless and injurious to themselves and to others. There are persons, who conceive that because they have not openly and maliciously opposed the truths of Revelation, they must have embraced them, and therefore they continue in a lifeless and inactive state, and feel no desire, and make no efforts for the prosperity of religion. Such persons, however vain they may be of their fancied attainments, and however high they may stand in the estimation of the world, are not the friends and followers of the Redeemer. "He that is not with me," says the Saviour, "is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad."‡ If we do not appear as his sincere and faithful disciples, he will account us as his secret enemies. If we are not improved by the ordinances of religion, if they do not enlighten our minds, and sanctify our hearts, we receive real and serious injury. For they are either the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death. We must forget the things which are behind, and reach forth unto those which are before, if we are desirous to preserve ourselves from lukewarmness and apostacy. It is impossible for any person to neglect and resist the truths of religion, without becoming more hardened

* Heb. ii. 2, 3. † Luke xvi. 31. ‡ Matt. xii. 30.

and confirmed in iniquity. For, we must make an effort to resist the truths of the gospel, if they do not sink into our hearts: we must strive to banish our convictions of sin, if they do not terminate in sincere and unfeigned repentance. And these efforts and exertions to escape from our duty, increase the power of inward depravity; encourage our spiritual adversaries; and render our hearts more callous and insensible. The man who has listened for thirty, for forty, perhaps for sixty years, to the warnings of providence and the invitations of mercy, without receiving any spiritual advantage, is certainly chargeable with greater guilt, and exposed to a severer punishment, than the youth who has only begun his career. Although he be still in the place of repentance and of hope, he is in a more wretched situation, and he is more difficult to be reclaimed than even the ignorant and untutored heathen. Religion has lost the charm of novelty in his estimation. It has just sufficient power to keep alive an outward profession; but it never reaches the heart. "The men of Nineveh," says our Lord, "shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and behold, a greater than Jonas is here. The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, a greater than Solomon is here."* Our Lord represents unfruitful professors in this parable as cumberers of the ground. They are entirely useless and unprofitable. They receive no spiritual improvement from the ordinances of religion themselves: they can do no good either by their instructions or example to their fellowmen: and, they bring no honour and glory to God. Their light is concealed under a bushel, and their talent is hid in the earth. Their very acts of devotion are defiled and polluted with sin, and abominable in

* Matt. xii. 41, 42.

the sight of God. "Bring no more vain oblations," saith the prophet Isaiah; "incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting."* But hypocritical professors are not merely unprofitable, they are injurious. They are tares among the wheat: like briers and thorns in the midst of a cultivated and fruitful field: they encumber the ground, and occupy a place which might be filled up with greater advantage by others. They impoverish the soil, they withdraw the support and nourishment provided for the fruitful trees; and yet, they derive no advantage to themselves. "They shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for they neither go in themselves, neither suffer those that are entering to go in." They bring reproach upon the religion they profess; they grieve the hearts of sincere christians; and render open transgressors, more daring and outrageous. It is difficult to find language sufficiently strong and forcible, to delineate their character, and expose their baseness and treachery. "These," saith Jude, "are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame: wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever."† Is this the character of the hypocritical professor, and ought you not to inquire, whether or not the description applies to yourselves? You enjoy the ordinances of religion in great abundance, you are often warned and admonished, invited and entreated to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; and therefore, you must be either sincere Christians or empty hypocrites. It remains with you to determine this important enquiry. You can ascertain your progress in the arts and sciences—by examining your

* Isaiah i. 13. † Jude 12, 13.

books you can estimate the amount of your property: and ought you not to be desirous to make your calling and election sure, to grow in grace and in the knowledge of your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Of all your duties this is the most necessary and important, it is the one thing needful; and therefore it ought by no means to be deferred till some more convenient season. Whilst there are so many instances of mortality even among the young, the healthy, and the prosperous around you, whilst you are so frequently reminded of the vanity of human expectation, and the shortness and uncertainty of human life, can you remain calm and unmoved, as if you alone were exempted from the stroke of the king of terrors? Whilst the great Judge of the world is viewing your conduct, and seeking in it the fruits of piety and holiness, can you be thoughtless and immoral? Be persuaded to give an immediate attention to your everlasting interests, and "work whilst it is to-day, for the night cometh when no man can work:" If you should continue barren and unfruitful, have you not reason to fear that the kingdom of God will be taken from you, and given to others bringing forth the fruits thereof, whilst you are cut down as cumberers of the ground? Which leads us

4. To attend in the fourth and last place to the awful sentence which is here denounced against the unfruitful professor: "Cut it down," saith our Saviour, "why cumbereth it the ground?" Such a threatening as this ought to arouse the attention of the most careless and indifferent, and have a meliorating influence upon our thoughts, our views, and our practice. If there is any sign of repentance and amendment yet remaining, surely, the terrors of the Lord ought not to be disregarded: for whilst his favour is better than life, his displeasure must be worse even than death itself. The condition of the Chaldean Monarch was distressing indeed, when "a watcher and an holy one came down from heaven, and cried aloud, and said

thus, Hew down the tree, and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit: let the beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from his branches."* But how infinitely more painful and distressing is the condition of the empty professor, when he is stript of all his flattering pretensions, and his false hopes perish; when the threatening of Jehovah is carried into execution, and he is cut down as a cumberer of the ground? The awful threatening in the words of our text, is sometimes carried into execution in the present life. Unfruitful professors, tired of restraint, and yielding to the influence of temptation, sometimes cast off the form of godliness altogether, and sink into open profligacy and impiety; so that their last state becomes worse than the first. "If a man abide not in me," says our Lord, "he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered, and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned." And if the divine patience and forbearance lead us not unto repentance, the threatening here denounced, will assuredly be carried into execution at death and the final judgment. If sinners are not inclined to submit to the divine mercy, they may expect to feel the stroke of divine justice. The Lord has not lost his authority over us, because we have lost our allegiance to him. Although the wicked should sometimes appear prosperous in this world, and enjoy more than their hearts could wish, the Lord hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness, and render to every one according to his works. We may forget that this day is approaching, and neglect our preparation for eternity; but our negligence cannot prolong the period of repentance and forgiveness, or change the purpose of infinite Wisdom. "But and if," says our Lord, "that evil servant shall say in his heart, My Lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to smite his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken, the

* Daniel iv. 13, 14.

lord of that servant shall come in a day when he look eth not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* I know it has become fashionable with many, to deride the idea of future punishment. But is it possible that the mere opinion of those, who have an interest in disbelieving this doctrine, can efface it from the records of inspiration? Must God cease to be just, because we choose to be wicked? Will he neglect to punish our sins, because we have forgotten their commission? Such thoughts as these are blasphemous and impious to the last degree. Rest assured, my brethren, that there is a time when divine forbearance, though long continued, will assuredly come to an end. You cannot weary God's patience, and finally prosper. You cannot follow the the paths of iniquity, and pass unpunished. Though you may now affect to despise the day of retribution, and say to your souls, Eat, drink, and be merry, the axe may already be laid to the root of the tree, to cut you down as cumberers of the ground. The sentence of heaven may have already been issued; this year thou shalt die. A mortal disease contracted perhaps by your own irregularities, may now lurk in your vitals, which shall soon reduce your feeble body to a lifeless corpse, and dismiss your immortal spirit into the unseen world. And the longer the storm has been gathering the heavier it will fall. The longer the sword has been whetting the sharper it will cut, and the deeper it will wound. "The servant which knoweth his Lord's will, and prepareth not himself, neither doth according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes." The exercise of the divine patience and forbearance towards us, if it does not soften our hearts, will certainly aggravate our guilt and increase our punishment. "Because I have purged thee," saith the prophet Ezekiel, "and thou wast not purged,

* Matt. xxiv. 48—51.

thou shalt not be purged from thy filthiness any more, till I have caused my fury to rest upon thee."* "Or, despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God."† If you are still alienated from God and enemies to him in your minds and by wicked works, you are living without hope, and all your delusive expectations are only refuges of lies. Some of you may conceive that there is still sufficient time for repentance, because you are in the days of youth. But this expectation can afford you no security from the stroke of death. Others may flatter themselves with the hope of future repentance because they are in the vigour of manhood. But no expectation can be more foolish our delusive, for the healthiest and most robust cannot promise to themselves another day. And surely those who are declining in years, and hovering around the brink of the grave, have no temptation to delay repentance, when there is but a step between them and death. If we are convinced of the necessity of repentance and reformation let us resolve, in the strength of divine grace to break off our sins immediately, let us make haste to keep the divine commandments. For when the mandate of Jehovah is issued, there is no resisting, it must be obeyed. And if it should find us sleeping or unprepared, O how awful must be our situation! how alarming our prospects! With the utmost eagerness and alacrity let us run into our strong hold, whilst we are the prisoners of hope, let us believe in the name [illegible] of God that we may have life, and trust in [illegible] as the only covert from the storm, the only hiding-place from the tempest. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near;

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* Ezek. xxiv. 13. † Rom. ii. 4, 5.

let the wicked forsal his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."*

"Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever."† Amen.

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* Isaiah lv. 6, 7. † Heb. xiii. 20, 21.

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